

By Renee Schoof

Members of North Carolina's congressional delegation welcomed a bipartisan Senate plan on immigration on Monday that would tighten borders and offer many of the estimated 11 million people here unlawfully a path to citizenship.

The blueprint also would give special consideration to agricultural workers, a move that could help ease employers' concerns in the state's large agricultural sector.

"Too many important issues have gone unaddressed in Washington because of partisan bickering, so I am pleased that a bipartisan group of senators has reached consensus on principles for reforming our broken immigration system," Sen. Kay Hagan, a Democrat from Greensboro, said.

"It is critical that Republicans and Democrats are working together to find common ground," Hagan said in a statement. She said she'd consider any proposals for "a comprehensive approach to immigration reform."

Freshman Rep. Richard Hudson, a Republican from Concord, also welcomed the blueprint worked out by eight Republican and Democratic senators on Monday.

"Reforming our broken and inefficient immigration system is necessary for economic growth and a secure homeland," Hudson said, adding he hoped the proposal would "jump-start" the debate.

"However, I need to see details in a bill to determine if it strengthens our borders and includes assurances that undocumented immigrants will not receive public benefits," Hudson added.

The eight senators said they were working on proposed legislation with details and would offer it

later.

Hudson said any overall plan should make sure that immigrants whose work is needed, particularly in agriculture, can work in the United States. But he said he wouldn't support a plan that put illegal immigrants in line for green cards ahead of those who entered legally.

The blueprint said that agricultural workers should be "treated differently than the rest of the undocumented population because of the role they play in ensuring that Americans have safe and secure agricultural products to sell and consume."

Other illegal immigrants, however, would have to wait in line for green cards behind those who were already seeking them legally.

David Ward, a spokesman for U.S. Sen. Richard Burr, a Republican from Winston-Salem, said Burr "has long said that we need to reform our nation's immigration laws, but the proposal outlined today is just that – a proposal."

Ward said Burr would examine the details and work toward "the kind of deal that will benefit our nation and the American people."

U.S. Rep. David Price, a Democrat from Chapel Hill, said he also wanted to see details, but was encouraged by the plan, particularly its proposals for stronger employment verification and the offer of eventual citizenship for those who take all steps required toward legal status.

Price is the ranking Democrat on the House Homeland Security Appropriations Subcommittee. He said that funding decisions on border enforcement have pushed President Barack Obama's administration to make sure that criminals are at the top of the list for deportation.

But enforcement isn't enough, Price said. "There really needs to be comprehensive legislation. That's where we seem to be headed now."

Sensible security

Others also said they wanted major changes in immigration policy.

"I am sure that we will review serious immigration reform this year," said U.S. Rep. Howard Coble, a senior Republican member of the House Judiciary Committee from Greensboro.

"For many years I have maintained that we need comprehensive immigration reform that includes securing the border, implementing an effective guest worker program, and addressing the situation of illegal aliens already in the United States without granting amnesty," Coble said. "I am willing to look at any and all proposals that will be put before us."

The initiative also includes promises of the latest equipment and other support for the Border Patrol to reduce the number of illegal crossings.

Republican U.S. Rep. Patrick McHenry whose 10th District includes Charlotte suburbs, didn't like the way the eight came up with the plan.

"This kind of backroom dealmaking has been tried by a small group of senators in the past," he said. "The American people deserve an open and fair legislative process, not more deals cut behind closed doors. I'll reserve judgment until legislation makes its way through our committee process and I continue to believe that any sensible immigration reform must start with securing our borders."

Rep. Renee Ellmers, a Republican from Dunn, said she was "excited to know that we are very close to having a bipartisan plan of action."

"It is imperative that we balance our immigration policies with a focused approach that allows

our government to adequately secure our borders while accounting for who is entering our country and what their purposes are," Ellmers said. "But as we provide for this protection, we must also find a solution that allows hard working people in this country to contribute to our economy and earn the opportunity to achieve the American dream."

Other members of the state's U.S. House delegation did not respond on Monday to requests for comment.